

CELIE: A BLACK PROTAGONIST OF ALICE WALKER'S NOVEL IN SEARCH OF HER IDENTITY

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ABSTRACT

*The exploration of slavery and its lingering effects of degradation has predominantly been a male-centric pursuit in African American literature until the rise of counter-narratives by Black female authors. Studies focusing on works by African American women have primarily critiqued those written by men, addressing themes of racism, the challenges of empowering Black female characters, and the complexities of male-female relationships. Notably, Walker's writings aim to highlight the experiences of marginalized Black women in rural settings, who encounter frequent barriers that restrict their agency and economic prospects. The key theme of Walker's renowned novel, *The Color Purple*, centres on the mistreatment of women from a feminist viewpoint, which is the focal point of this discussion. The narrative illustrates that regardless of the forms of oppression a woman endures, she can resist by claiming her right to forge her own destiny. Celie is depicted as an unattractive, submissive, and uneducated woman who suffers both sexual and non-sexual oppression. Her decision to leave her husband in Memphis and establish her own business exemplifies her non-sexual self-determination, while her lesbian relationship with Shug represents her sexual self-determination, empowering her to confront and overcome various forms of oppression. This examination of Celie's struggle for self-determination in *The Color Purple* employs a feminist lens and radical feminist theory. Walker compellingly illustrates how enslaved African American women would rise and strive for a better future for themselves and their offspring.*

Keywords: Alice Walker, *The Color Purple*, Lesbianism, Celie, Shug Avery, African American Literature, Race, Gender, Sexuality.

Introduction

As the most advanced species on the planet, humans possess an inherent desire for connection through communication and social interaction. Demartoto (2010) identifies three primary elements of sexuality: biological sex, gender identity, and gender roles. Additionally, heterosexual, bisexual, and homosexual orientations are prevalent among individuals, even when they conflict with societal expectations (Mastuti et al., 2012). Biological, psychological, and environmental factors influence an individual's sexual orientation, which was once considered a disorder (Brook, 2001). Ultimately, the evolution of our species toward asexuality was a strategy to enhance reproductive success and achieve greater material prosperity (Fokky, 2019).

Many literary works explore the complexities of human behavior and relationships through the lens of sexual deviance. For example, Hanum (2011) analyzed Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* for its representation of lesbianism, drawing attention to the protagonist Celie's experiences and the novel's examination of lesbian identity. Andani (2010) also examined the psychological aspects of Rafky and Valent's homosexuality in Andrei Aksana's *Lelaki Terindah*. Taking a psychological tack reminiscent of Adler's (1956) work, this investigation seeks to deduce what influences Celie's lesbian identity and

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actions. This study aims to contribute to the literature on LGBT representation and its societal and academic ramifications by exploring the psychological complexities of the characters and their interactions.

There is beauty in the diversity of sexuality. The way a person acts, their character traits, and their sense of self are all defined by their sexual orientation. For the most part, people's sexual orientation is determined by the type of partner they have romantic relationships with, whether that's someone of the same sex or someone of a different sex. Homosexuals and bisexuals endure persistent stigma and discrimination due to the widespread misconception that heterosexuality is the sole "normal" sexual orientation or just a lack of knowledge and understanding of these identities. Note that those who prefer lovers of the opposite sex are called heterosexuals, those who prefer partners of the same sex are called homosexuals, and those who prefer partners of both sexes are called bisexuals. Alice Walker, a feminist and a lesbian, received both high acclaim and harsh criticism for her Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Color Purple*, which dealt with taboo topics including Black female lesbianism. Because of the persistent prejudice, this study suggests studying Celie's quest for self-discovery in greater detail, with an emphasis on what leads her to identify as a lesbian.

Although the Black Liberation Movement's overarching goal was the emancipation of Black people, its primary focus was on Black males. "Brave" concluded that the Black Liberation Movement equated freedom with manhood and the redemption of Black masculinity with Black freedom. Consequently, Black women experienced sexual discrimination since many Black males in the movement wanted authority over their bodies. Alice Walker's coining of the term "womanist" was a huge step forward for Black women who were sexually and racially oppressed in their fight for equality.

The Color Purple: An Existential Novel by Marc Christophe defines Walker's use of the term "womanist," which appears for the first time in Walker's 1983 work *In Search of Our Mother's Garden*. There is no way to separate the meaning of the word "oppression" from its context. Its origin and final destination are etymologically and metaphorically vague, leaving room for various literal, figurative, epistemic, and literal interpretations. There are many different kinds of oppression, including but not limited to economic inequality, racism, sexism, lynching, religious intolerance, slavery, and casteism.

Around the turn of the twentieth century, African-American women in the American South faced double oppression due to their gender and race. They were subject to prejudice and oppression on a systematic level due to gender and race. Despite perpetually being the oppressed, women spoke up. Through the ages, they have staged several uprisings to secure equal rights. The three waves of feminism in the United States are a useful illustration of this concept. These motions demonstrate the agency that women exercise. Women may overcome the oppressions they face by asserting their right to self-determination. According to Camille Paglia, "What this means is that the individual should be granted the freedom to do anything that does not restrict the freedom of any other individual to do anything they wish" (Madsen, 2000: 24). This is the definition of "self-determination".

The author chose Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* as her point of reference for this research because, as the novel's protagonist Celie demonstrates, the power of the individual to resist oppression is a central theme throughout the book. A girl named Celie, who is fourteen years old, has lived through oppression. Her stepfather is abusing and raping her. She feels compelled to marry a man who also abuses her. We can broadly categorize her experiences of oppression into two categories: sexual and non-sexual.

She plays the role of a subservient lady early on in the plot. She accepts all forms of persecution without resistance. In the end, though, she can respond to and resist any form of oppression by asserting her right to self-determination. At the turn of the twentieth century, African American women and lesbianism were socially taboo topics in the United States. Patriarchal domination and heteronormativity pushed non-normative sexual identities to the periphery of public conversation in this society. Specifically, both white culture and the African-American community pathologized and stigmatized lesbianism. The religious establishment's condemnation of same-sex partnerships as evil and immoral served to further isolate those who did not conform to heterosexual standards. Legal prosecution, familial rejection, and social exclusion exacerbated the difficulties lesbian women encountered in overcoming racial and gender inequalities. Through Celie and Shug Avery's passionate romance, which defies social norms and questions traditional ideas of love and desire, Alice Walker directly addresses these taboos in *The Color Purple*. Within the context of African-American women's lives, Walker's depiction of lesbianism challenges heteronormative narratives and provides a platform for the study of non-normative sexual identities.

Reflection on Relationships among Lesbians

The critical framework of queer theory, which arose in the late 20th century, sought to examine and dismantle conventional ideas of gender and sexuality. Queer theory questions rigid notions of sexuality and desire and their foundations in the writings of thinkers like Michel Foucault, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and Judith Butler. While our protagonist, Celie, has negative emotions at the outset of the novel, she ultimately gains a positive outlook as she realizes her humanity via her expression and self-discovery. When her abusers attack her, Celie is helpless at first. At the age of fourteen, her stepfather Alphonso—whom she refers to as "Pa"—rapes her, exploits her by selling her children, and then warns her, "You better not tell anybody but God." Your mom would die from it (1). She is so distraught that she believes him and starts writing letters to God, detailing her ordeal. "Dear God," thus opens the book. Before long, her stepfather grows bored with her and sells her as a bride to Mr. ____ Albert, turning her into a tool for his ravenous appetite. According to him, I need to get rid of her. Her age makes her a poor fit for this house. Her age (18) also negatively affects my other girls. For a while, she finds solace in writing letters to God. Mr. ____'s residence is twice as depressing as Celie's previous abode. Her stepson nearly gets away unscathed after hurting her on her wedding day. Mr. ____ takes advantage of her by preventing Celie from receiving letters from her sister Nettie. Shug Avery's entrance marks a turning point in Celie's life, and their bond allows Celie to develop and discover herself. Celie lacks the self-awareness necessary to craft an impactful story until she and Shug come upon Nettie's letters.

White men of the time generally believed—and many Black men did as well—that they could do anything they wanted with Black women. Walker's portrayal of Black existence reveals more than what is initially apparent. Nettie, aided by her missionary companions, escapes to a middle-class Black life, in contrast to Celie and Albert, who are bound to the land and the harsh existence it symbolizes. Many African Americans were able to escape poverty because of the influence of religion in southern states. By writing to God and Nettie, Celie is practicing religious literacy and understanding the world outside her tiny village, which includes Africa. Through establishing a link to Africa, Walker highlights the significance of African American heritage. The book emphasizes the significance of articulating one's emotions and ideas as fundamental to becoming an individual. Thus, female consciousness patterns go through a whole cycle of self-assertion, each time taking a new shape.

After years of oppression at the hands of her stepfather and husband, Celie finally decides she needs a break from the male dominance in her family. Celie has a lesbian relationship with Shug to escape the dominance and oppression she feels from males and to break free from patriarchy. Celie, on the other hand, is completely at ease and protected by Shug. Additionally, Shug has no idea that Celie is actually her maid. The reason Shug takes Celie to Memphis is so she can support her. It is her sincere wish that Celie regains her independence. By treating Celie like a servant, Shug avoids making Celie feel oppressed. Shug is a symbol of independence and self-determination in *The Color Purple*. Shug, a beautiful woman, often reminds Celie that she deserves equality in life. Because she is free, Shug exemplifies a character who could live her life without fear of tyranny. Since Celie's life came to a halt when she left home, she has the option to begin over by developing a connection with Shug. Then I reconsider. Once it ends with Mr. Maybe, it will pick back up with Shug (p. 72). Celie's life abruptly ended the day she married Albert. Nevertheless, once she meets Shug, she can begin over. Radical feminism would approve of this (Wardon, 1986: 135). Women, it added, must stand in solidarity with one another. To get over this, Celie needs the help of others around her, like Shug, who have been through oppressions themselves. After coming to terms with one another, Shug and Celie form an unbreakable bond. Celie deserves equality, and Shug is there to back her up and encourage her.

Alice Walker's Language and Representation

In *The Color Purple*, Alice Walker uses a variety of language techniques to show how her characters feel and what they've been through, especially in regard to sexuality, gender, and race. Walker depicts the varied and intricate experiences of African-American women in the early 20th-century South in a vivid and evocative linguistic environment that she crafts using imagery, narrative voice, and dialect. Dialect and vernacular speech are prominent linguistic characteristics of the book. Walker gives her characters' conversations richness and realism by capturing the rhythms and cadences of African-American English. Because of her humble origins and lack of formal education, Celie's narrative language is spare and straightforward. A casual tone permeates her correspondence with God, revealing the depth and urgency of her innermost feelings and ideas. Walker amplifies the realities of oppressed and suppressed African American women via Celie's character.

Walker uses symbolism and strong imagery to delve into her characters' sensory experiences and express deeper themes, in addition to dialect. For instance, the book frequently employs *The Color Purple* as a potent symbol of strength, transformation, and empowerment. "I suppose it annoys God if you go by *The Color Purple* in a field someplace and don't see it" (Walker, 1982, p. 203), thinking of Celie as she contemplates. Invoking *The Color Purple* metaphorically captures the novel's themes of emancipation and self-discovery while also emphasizing the significance of appreciating the richness and beauty of life's events.

The language choices that Walker makes also help to support and authenticate the experiences of LGBT people within African-American communities. Walker recognizes the necessity of recognizing disadvantaged identities and the complexity of African-American experiences by giving voice to characters like Shug and Celie, who traverse the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality. Scholars who have studied Walker's use of language have pointed out the novel's revolutionary capacity to challenge dominant narratives and to envision alternative forms of resistance and freedom. "The linguistic innovation in *The Color Purple* is not merely a matter of stylistic experimentation; rather, it represents a powerful form of political resistance," says Valerie Smith (Smith, 1995, p. 58). Walker, by her words and images, compels readers to reconsider their preconceived notions about sexuality, gender, and power in order to imagine a society that is more inclusive and egalitarian.

Nettie shows Celie that she is free is by demonstrating that she has self-determination. She has the freedom to choose according to her personal tastes. She, too, is striving for independence. She fights Albert by taking action. Upon leaving the house, Nettie discovers that Albert is trailing behind her. Initially, she chooses to disregard him and increases her pace. Still, it leaves the door open for Albert to try to kiss her. Nettie harms Albert as a response and a kind of resistance (170).

After realizing she has the power to make her own decisions, Celie is finally able to confront her stepfather and husband. Radical feminism would have us do this. For radical feminists, it's all about providing a realistic picture of women's lives when they're furious with oppressive males, giving them tools to channel their anger in the right direction, and pointing them toward a fight for self-determination (Madsen, 2000: 163). The right to choose one's own fate is at the heart of Celie's resistance to the persecution she faces. The people who oppress her in her family—her stepfather, her husband, and her children—are the targets of her wrath.

Conclusion

African American women have achieved enormous success despite facing and overcoming systemic injustice. Despite racism, sexism, and the idea that women are inferior, Black women have triumphed and continue to do so. Black female authors have addressed the historical and contemporary plight of Black women in America via a range of approaches. In the first half of *The Color Purple*, Walker effectively uses the image of the slave to demonstrate this development. Walker essentially traces the difficult journeys of Black women to self-actualization and liberty and then recommends the way forward for liberated women. Finally, *The Color Purple* demonstrates that gender discrimination is a real problem today. Sexual and nonsexual forms of oppression are common. The patriarchal society in which women live is the main reason for this. Women suffer subjugation in patriarchal societies. When oppressed, women should have the ability to defend themselves by exercising their right to self-determination and making their own decisions. They must vent their frustrations on the oppressor and strive to permanently end patriarchy, enabling women to live free from it. One key to comprehending Celie's acceptance of her connection with Shug is the premise of self-personality theory. Celie's increased self-awareness and realization of her love for Shug indicate a shift toward authenticity and self-acceptance.

Finally, Celie's rejection of heteronormative standards and ultimate acceptance of a lesbian identity are both influenced by her traumatic experiences and the cruelty she endured at men's hands. Additionally, it is impossible to ignore the impact of Celie's social and environmental milieu on her path to self-discovery. Both her community's expectations and the cultural standards surrounding gender and sexuality influence Celie's understanding of love and desire. Crucial to Celie's journey into her lesbian identity is Shug, a powerful and encouraging partner who questions traditional gender norms and provides a haven for self-expression.

The Color Purple's depiction of Celie's lesbianism, taken as a whole, is an inspiring story about the complexities of human identity and the strength of the human will. While Celie's story celebrates the transforming power of love and unity, Alice Walker challenges readers to reevaluate their preconceived notions about gender, sexuality, and power. Thinking back on Celie's tale brings home the value of being true to yourself, accepting yourself as you are, and pushing through hardship to find pleasure.

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